

Matt Driscoll: Legislature lining up in punt formation on McCleary, yet again

Monday was the first day of the 2016 legislative session

When it comes to McCleary, lawmakers say they need more information

All signs point toward another year of inaction on basic education funding

By Matt Driscoll

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And so it begins.

State lawmakers convened in Olympia on Monday, the first day of this year's 60-day session.



News Tribune columnist Matt Driscoll Drew Perine Staff photographer

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When historians look back on the 2016 legislative effort — one that seems destined to be defined by the important things that got put off — they're likely to ask one painful question.

Why'd they even bother?

That's the cynic in me speaking, of course. When it comes to expecting much out of our state's legislators, I have a tendency to be what [The News Tribune's Melissa Santos](#) might call a glass-half-empty guy.

I set the bar low. It's a coping mechanism, really, developed over time. I've learned it's better to expect next to nothing and be annoyed when it comes true than hope for more and get routinely crushed.

But there's a new wrinkle this year. I'm not the only one expecting little out of lawmakers in Olympia, especially when it comes to education funding and the unmet state Supreme Court mandate known as McCleary.

Apparently, they aren't expecting much either.

That's the reality that quickly became clear last week, when watching the annual Associated Press Legislative Preview, along with the rollout of what Gov. Jay Inslee is calling a "bipartisan plan for taking next steps on K-12 funding reforms."

While it's customary for politicians to at least *act* like there's a chance they'll get something done, this year they're not even faking it.

Rather, they're punting — with the kind of enthusiasm that would make the Seahawks' Jon Ryan proud.

I look forward to continuing to work with the Legislature this session and beyond on this important priority. Governor Jay Inslee

It was 2012 when the state Supreme Court initially ruled in the McCleary case that the Legislature was failing to live up to its constitutional obligation — or "paramount duty" — to fund basic education.

Although steps in the right direction have been made — most recently the \$1.3 billion added to education funding last year — it hasn't been nearly enough.

That's why [the state Supreme Court is fining the Legislature \\$100,000 a day](#) for failing to act, and why one might assume that this year — 2016, for crying out loud — could hold the promise of an actual fix.

Instead, what we're getting — if we're lucky — is a plan for a future plan.

Please, public schoolchildren of Washington, hold your applause and celebration.

So what is the grand plan to make a plan?

To hear our lawmakers tell it, we need more information to truly understand the problem before they can get to work on it. The past four years, it seems, haven't been enough to really wrap our head around it. So lawmakers from both parties and chambers have spent the past few months meeting with the governor's office trying to make headway.

Now we're going to roll up our sleeves, study the situation this year, and hopefully come back in 2017 ready to act.

Hopefully.

Sure, we know districts across the state have become far too reliant on voter-approved property tax levies to get by, including funding teacher salaries. But just how bad is it?

Let's study it.

We know well-off districts can offer better salaries to top-notch teachers, leading to an obvious inequity. But what can be done to even the playing field?

We better analyze it.

And we know [the dreaded levy cliff is looming in 2018](#), when a temporary levy lift will run out and, unless something is done, financial calamity will ensue. But just how much money will it take?

Data, we're told. We need more data.

The two biggest, most contentious questions - how much new money is needed and where it will come from - will be answered another day.

"I am pleased to see that the bipartisan group I convened was able to find common ground and develop a good foundation for answering the very difficult questions related to our next steps for financing K-12 education," Inslee said in prepared remarks distributed to the press. "I look forward to continuing to work with the Legislature this session and beyond on this important priority."

Beyond is the key word there. The two biggest, most contentious questions — how much new money is needed and where it will come from — will be answered another day.

As we ring in the start of the 2016 session, it's depressingly clear that the best we can hope for is that 2017 will be the magic year for McCleary.

Fingers crossed.

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